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# COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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# 2 Is learning to read and write the same as learning to speak?

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JENNIFER HAMMOND

## INTRODUCTION

The question which concerns this chapter is an important one in any book attempting to offer a fresh look at literacy. Like spoken language, writing is easily taken for granted, both in that its character is often not fully understood, and in that its particular demands in learning are frequently underestimated. Literacy is one of the most valued of the skills that schooling offers children, and it is clear that children will make little progress in their school learning unless they achieve considerable levels of proficiency in literacy.

In recent years it has often been suggested that the most appropriate approaches to the teaching of literacy will be those that attempt to parallel the natural processes by which children learn to talk. Just as children learn to talk because of the need to interact with others, mastering the various features of their mother tongue in largely unconscious ways, so too, it is suggested, literacy will best be learned through a mainly unconscious adoption of the features of the written mode. Spelling, handwriting and punctuation all need to be learned, but, it is argued, these will best be learned while children have various encounters with print materials and engage in a number of writing activities.

Such arguments, often based upon close observation of young children learning to talk, have had the merit of causing teachers to reflect upon the ways speech is learned in use, and to plan for the most desirable contexts in which children can learn to read and write. In these senses, such arguments have been very helpful. However, they are also misleadingly simple. I shall argue that as they fail to acknowledge just how different from the spoken mode writing actually is, for related reasons they also fail to acknowledge that the written mode is not learned in the same ways as speech.

In order to address properly the question of what the basics of literacy

entail, we need to have information about the nature of language, especially its spoken and written modes and their relationship to each other. In this chapter I shall consider firstly both the similarities and differences between speech and writing and, secondly, focus on students' developing awareness of these differences. I shall argue that where teachers have an appropriate sense of the nature of language and of the significant differences between speech and writing, they will be in a better position to teach literacy, developing the kinds of capacities valued and discussed in detail in several other chapters of this book. In developing my discussion, I shall draw on systemic functional linguistics, developed by Halliday and others (e.g. Halliday, 1978, 1985b; Halliday and Hasan, 1976, 1985), to provide both a theoretical framework and a means of analysing language.

## A COMPARISON OF SPEECH AND WRITING

To explore the question of the relationship between learning to speak and learning to read and write, I shall begin by examining spoken and written language used by some year 9 students in one of their English lessons. This year 9 class had been studying the novel *Z for Zachariah* by Robert O'Brien. The lesson from which the following texts were taken consisted of a discussion of the two major characters in the novel, Ann and Mr Loomis. Following the oral discussion which took place during the English lesson, the students were asked to write a summary of the two characters. Most of the writing was done during a subsequent lesson. The oral discussion, and the writing that followed, were part of the normal routine of the class English lessons. Text 2.1 is part of the recorded discussion about the two characters that took place during the lesson, and texts 2.2 and 2.3 (pages 28–31) are examples of the written work produced by the students following the class discussion.

### Text 2.1

*(At this point the discussion is about the character of Mr Loomis.)*

**Student:** He's got that sort of attitude, like he seems so used to a life of power and glory and now that he's with Ann and he sees how creative and nice she is, he doesn't, he sort of rejects her, doesn't want to open up his own feelings, and it's probably why he seems so dominating.

**Teacher:** Yes, J . . . ?

**J:** Umm.

**Teacher:** Well, think about it. K . . . ?

**K:** He's sort of got a hangup, sort of . . .

**Teacher:** About what?

**K:** About power, he's got to have it or else he's nowhere.

**Teacher:** Yes?

**Student:** Like, I reckon he would have been really like nice and like good and that, but now he's been to all the towns and seen, like there's no life or anything, and he comes into, um, the valley and sees Ann, and sees life, and he sort of, um, you

know, was the only one, he just wanted the power over her because, um, he's never had power or anything before.

**Teacher:** It's also possible that all the things, all the death and all the ghastly things that he must have seen, have made him so determined to survive, that it's made him sort of blind to anything and anyone else's feelings. But there is a suggestion in the novel, isn't there, that there is a softness in him, the way he responds to Ann's playing? What else does he respond to when he's very ill and unconscious?

**Student:** Her reading.

**Teacher:** Her reading. Her reading. So what suggests that there is a sensitivity in him, but very deeply buried? Yes?

**Student:** Well, I think he is just like the people who dropped the wall because (laughter) dropped the bomb, because they dropped it because they wanted something, and so he's doing things because that's the way he wants it.

**Teacher:** Mmm. And in the process of that, what is he also doing?

**Student:** He's just changing everything.

**Teacher:** Well, what did the people do in the process of getting what they wanted, what did they do?

**Student:** They hurt and killed people.

**Teacher:** They destroyed what they wanted. They left nothing. Yes, J ... ?

**J:** Umm, also we know that he's sensitive because how he dreams about when he's killed Edward, it's haunting him, like it's not as if he doesn't give it a second thought.

**Teacher:** Yes, he's got a conscience about killing Edward.

Text 2.2 Character summary of Mr Loomis written after classroom discussion (reduced size)

### Mr Loomis

Mr Loomis is totally opposite in character to Anne. He has a light complexion & reddish brown hair which is quite long & ~~has~~ a beard.

### Character

Mr Loomis never lets anyone stop him if he wants to do something. He's a very insecure person who needs to have power & control to keep him going.

Underneath, deep down there is somebody who's kind & compassionate, we see this side of Mr

hoomis' character when he thanks Anne for reading to him, playing the piano & holding his hand.

When Mr hoomis doesn't have power he becomes very insecure like when Anne confronts him & tells him she's leaving, he keeps asking her to stay & becomes brightened. When

Anne mentioned to Mr hoomis right at the end that if he had already killed Edward, ~~he~~ he might as well kill her, he falls to pieces & says how she doesn't know that for sure, so we also know that Mr hoomis has feelings of remorse about killing Edward & that he didn't really think of the consequences.

He wants to control Anne ~~but~~ but when Anne doesn't let him have his own way, he tries all sorts of ploys to make her come back to the house & be his "slave." He's always thinking of realistic, practical things whereas Anne loves to think about fantastic things & imagining happy, carefree things. I don't think Mr

hoomis enjoys doing things ~~for himself~~ for himself, he prefers to have Kate do all the dirty work while he sits back & relaxes.

Ann Burden.

Ann Burden, physically, is a slim, ~~tanned~~ girl with short, roughly cut, mousey blonde hair. She has a tanned complexion from working in the sun and wears men's clothes, for they are the most practical for farming.

At only sixteen, Ann is a mature and affectionate young lady. She values many things of the spirit, including going to church and reading the bible, along with reading creative novels and poetry. Ann likes to ~~the~~ collect flowers and places them in the church to keep alive the ~~spirit~~ spiritual life and hope, out of all the nuclear destruction and deadness outside the valley. Ann is a very strong person, in that she is able to survive alone in the valley without profound fear and without anyone to turn to for company or advice. She is also strong minded with a great sense of creativity which I find unique, because being able to ~~uphold~~ uphold a creative and optimistic attitude is almost courageous after what has happened.

Ann is not a withholding person. She is very deeply sensitive to Mr Loomis in the novel. She also displays a great amount of affection and love for him. It quite surprised me, how Ann had this attitude towards him (which is also another display of her).

courage), because, he was a total stranger from a different place and mainly, different values and Ann ~~there~~ made herself ~~value to be~~ vulnerable to be injured & hurt.

She also a very fair and considerate person. Even when she was driven out of her own home by Mr Loomis, Ann left half of the farm produce for him, when really he did not deserve it.

I think that Ann was a bit too sensitive in the novel to Mr Loomis. She could not think ill of anyone, probably because she was brought up that way and <sup>valued human life</sup> ~~care~~ so much.

Overall, ~~and~~ to finish off, Ann is an admirable character to anyone, who is kind and sensitive and a healthy minded person who valued many things of the spirit. She was also a independent person with a great sense of creativity and consciousness. Ann is also a level headed person ~~at~~ who has hope and thinks of her future well being.

## SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE SPOKEN AND WRITTEN TEXTS

The spoken and written texts broadly have the same purpose in that both attempt to describe and analyse the characters from the novel *Z for Zachariah*. Consequently there are a number of obvious similarities. For example, both the spoken and written texts contain many of the same vocabulary items, such as Mr Loomis, Ann, character, power, control, reading, playing the piano, etc.; and they both contain frequent use of the

pronouns *he* and *she* to refer to Mr Loomis and Ann. Because their purposes are to describe and analyse character, rather than to recreate the activities in which the characters engaged, both contain frequent use of verbs such as *is* and *has* rather than action verbs, and so on.

A more general point is that both spoken and written texts draw on the same underlying linguistic systems of English. That is, they both draw on the same systems of vocabulary items and grammar in order to make meaning. While this may seem to be an obvious point, I believe it is a very significant one. It means that the underlying similarities of speech and writing are important — more important than the differences. This point also provides the context for the subsequent discussion in this chapter. That is, there are real and significant similarities in spoken and written texts in English. These arise because spoken and written texts draw on the same linguistic systems. Choices made in the creation of any English text are choices within the available systems of vocabulary and grammar.

However, having stressed the importance of the similarities between spoken and written language, I would also like to point out that there are significant differences between them. Much of the rest of this chapter will be an exploration of these differences and a consideration of their educational implications.

## **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE**

Probably the most obvious difference between spoken and written texts is that the former are normally jointly constructed by two or more participants, while the latter are essentially monologues. Spoken texts, with few exceptions, are created by speakers in conjunction with other speakers, within the same physical context. Although one person may do most of the talking, as when someone delivers a lecture, the physical presence of the people being addressed is important in that they share the same context of situation with the speaker. In the majority of situations, they also contribute in some way to the construction of the text, even if their contribution is only a non-verbal one. Written texts, on the other hand, are typically produced in contexts removed by time and distance from those in which they are read. Consequently the writer cannot depend on a shared context to convey any of the meaning. The meaning must be contained within the text itself. The fact that spoken texts are jointly constructed while written texts are produced by writers in isolation from their readers has a significant influence on their organization and development. For example, the spoken and written texts from the year 9 class, presented above, are quite different in this regard.

The spoken text is dialogic in nature, and the discussion moves from one aspect of the topic to another in a flexible manner. It began with a description of Ann's character (not reproduced here). The discussion moves to what Mr Loomis had done to Ann, what Ann had done for Mr Loomis, Mr Loomis's need for power and control, a description of Mr Loomis's character,

how Ann planned for the future (also not reproduced here), and so on. While the discussion remains on the overall topic of the two characters, it ranges freely from one point to another. Within this discussion, the teacher is in a position of power. She introduces the topic of the discussion, determines who has the right to speak by nominating individual students, and closes the discussion at the end of the lesson. The teacher has an idea of the overall direction she wants the discussion to take. Frequently the content of the students' contributions relates to questions posed by the teacher. For example:

*Teacher:* Do you think she thought Mr Loomis was bad when he first arrived?

*Student:* Yes, even though he was only trying to scare her.

However, on other occasions, the responses given by the students clearly influence the direction of the discussion. For example:

*Student:* Like when he's very sick, he's always telling Ann what to do, say plan if you must think of the future.

*Teacher:* Do you think she was not thinking of the future?

Occasionally the students give unexpected responses and these alter the direction of the discussion:

*Student:* I think he thrives on it, he likes to have control.

*Teacher:* He thrives on it, doesn't he, yes. He needs it almost as a kind of incentive, as a stimulus. Yeah, you're right, I hadn't thought of that, I think that's a very good point.

Because of the dynamic nature of the classroom dialogue, it is impossible to predict the precise direction the discussion will take. It is the interaction occurring between teacher and students that creates the text, and while the teacher has the greatest influence, she can determine only the general direction of the discussion, not its every move.

The students' written texts are very different. They consist of sustained monologues, each produced by one pupil working by herself. Text 2.2 begins with a physical description and then moves on to an analysis of Mr Loomis's character. He is described as, among other things, insecure and needing power and control. Text 2.3 also begins with a physical description and then moves on to a description of Ann's character. Fewer points are made about the character in this text, but each is developed more fully. Ann is described as mature, affectionate, strong and sensitive. The writer refers back to the novel for evidence to support each point. The organization of this second text, I suggest, makes it a more successful written text than the one about Mr Loomis. In text 2.3 the writer has presented a number of points about Ann's character and has developed and dealt with one point at a time. The author of text 2.2 has tended to some extent to do what is typical of speech rather than of writing — to touch on a point, move on to something else, and then come back to the first point again. For example,

she has referred to Mr Loomis's need for control and to his insecurity at three different places in her text.

While there are some important differences between the two written texts in terms of the success of their organization and development, they are much more like each other than they are like the spoken text. That is, there are real and significant differences between the organization and development of the spoken text in comparison with the organization and development of the two written texts.

## NATURE AND PURPOSE OF SPEECH AND WRITING

The reason why the spoken and written texts shown above are organized differently has to do with the very nature of speech and writing, and the purposes for which they have evolved in a literate society. In the history of human evolution, speech was the primary language mode. It evolved to fulfil the communicative and social needs of people who lived in nomadic communities, and for many thousands of years spoken language fulfilled these needs adequately. It was not until people began living in settled communities that language functions began to change. People needed to be able to count their livestock, to keep records of exchanges of money, to record taxes etc., and hence the need for a means of keeping more permanent records arose. Writing evolved to fulfil these needs. (See Halliday, 1985a, for a more comprehensive account of the evolution of writing.) Thus literacy gradually developed many millennia after the evolution of speech to serve human needs which the spoken mode did not satisfy. The different functions for which the spoken and written modes of language evolved can be seen in the purposes for which the two modes are used today. Speech is typically used where participants are face to face, as in conversations, service encounters, recounts of personal experiences, or in formal and informal learning situations. Writing is used where some kind of permanent record of facts, information or ideas is required. The situation in regard to speaking and writing within a literate society is somewhat analogous to a bilingual community, where different languages are used in different contexts by the people of that community. If separate contexts and separate purposes for the use of the two languages disappear, the society becomes monolingual. There is no need to have two languages that fulfil the same functions and purposes. Similarly, in literate societies the written mode exists because it fulfils functions and purposes that the oral mode cannot. Oral and written modes are used for different purposes and occur in different contexts.

As spoken language and written language fulfil different purposes in society, it is hardly surprising that their natures are different. Speech is dynamic in the sense that it is created at the moment of speaking and, unless it is recorded with twentieth-century recording equipment, exists only for that moment. Typically (as in the texts shown above) it is created jointly by two or more people and thus it develops fluidly as each participant contributes. It is not preplanned in most cases, and it cannot be drafted and

edited. The participants are together in the context in which the speech is being constructed. Because of this they quite frequently share knowledge and background information. Even if their shared knowledge is minimal, participants in most speech situations can request clarification if they have not understood something. They can ask for more details, for clarification of time and place, identity of the participants, sequence of events, or points in an argument. That is, because speech is constructed jointly by participants in a particular context, the context itself contributes to the meaning being created. The context includes the actual physical location, any non-verbal gestures, intonation used, and so on.

Writing, on the other hand, by its nature is not dynamic but fixed. A written text is a relatively permanent record, in that it can be reflected upon and analysed. It can be read by someone who is not in the same geographical or time location as the writer, and it can be read as many times as the reader wishes. A written text has an existence beyond the moment in which it is created. It can therefore be planned and it can be edited and drafted in a way that a spoken text can never be. In a different way, we draft and redraft in speech all the time — with hesitations, false starts, and self corrections. However, in speech we cannot throw away the drafts as we do in writing. It is essential for written texts to be planned and edited and carefully developed so that the writer can be sure the intended message is the one actually conveyed. The writer must ensure that all details of participants, sequence of events, sets of arguments, bodies of information are provided in a way that enables the reader to understand the message of the text. The reader, because she or he is not in the same context as the writer, cannot request clarification of any points that are not clear from the text itself. That is, a written text must be independent of the context in which it is created. It must be decontextualized so that it makes sense in another time and place for a reader who may never meet the writer.

In summary, speech and writing are used in different contexts because they have evolved to satisfy different human needs. With the steady evolution of human societies, language has had to serve increasingly complex purposes. Hence, as the spoken and written modes have developed, they have drawn differently upon the various aspects of the linguistic system, particularly the grammatical system. In the next section I shall attempt to explain some of these different grammatical aspects.

## ASPECTS OF GRAMMAR IN SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE

### Lexical density

To begin the discussion of grammatical differences between speech and writing, I shall introduce the expression *lexical item*. This is a technical term used by many linguists to refer to sets of vocabulary or content items as they are typically found clustered in different texts. Lexical items are the words that carry the content of the text. They are the words that are found in

dictionaries, as they can be easily defined. They belong to an open set of linguistic items, in the sense that any language continually adds to its store of available lexical items for reference to new technology, new objects or new ideas.

In the following example, I have underlined the lexical items in a short extract from the beginning of text 2.3:

Ann Burden physically is a slim girl with short, roughly cut, mousy  
blonde hair.  
She has a tanned complexion from working in the sun  
and wears men's clothes  
for they are the most practical for farming

The words which are not underlined are grammatical items. The main function of grammatical items in a text is not to provide the message, but to establish and maintain the relationships between the lexical items. Grammatical items help to hold the text together — that is their job. As Halliday (1985a:61) points out, grammatical items include:

articles: e.g. a, the  
pronouns: e.g. he, she, you, me  
most prepositions: e.g. in, beside, under  
conjunctions: e.g. and, because, while  
some classes of adverbs: e.g. usually, often  
finite verbs: e.g. have, was, is (as in 'have eaten', 'was running', etc.)

Grammatical items belong to a closed system in the language in the sense that we do not keep inventing new articles and prepositions. There is a fixed number of such items in any language, and they are part of the system of grammar that is utilized in the making of meaning.

Halliday in his book *Spoken and Written Language* (1985a:67) has suggested that a useful way of comparing the distribution of lexical and grammatical items in any text is to establish a measure of lexical density. This can be done by simply dividing the number of lexical items by the number of clauses in the text. If we follow this system of measuring lexical density, we find that the above extract from text 2.3 has 19 lexical items spread across 4 clauses, thereby giving it a lexical density of 5.

Compare this with an extract from text 2.1, the spoken text:

*Student:* Like I reckon he would have been really nice but now that he's been to all the towns and seen like there's no life or anything and he comes into the valley and sees Ann and sees life and he just wanted power over her because he's never had power or anything before.

In this extract, there are 14 lexical items distributed across 10 clauses, thus the text has a lexical density of 1.4. The spoken text has a considerably lower lexical density per clause than the written text. As Halliday points out (1985a:61), this is a characteristic difference between spoken and written language. Written language typically is more lexically dense than spoken language. This is not because the topics of written texts are necessarily

different. In the above extracts from texts 2.1 and 2.3, the topics are similar, that is both texts are descriptions of the characters from the novel *Z for Zachariah*. The difference lies in the mode of organizing and presenting information. Written language is relatively dense: more information is packed into a single clause. Spoken language is relatively sparse.

How does this happen? What makes the written text more lexically dense than the spoken? What different aspects of the grammar are utilized in the construction of spoken and written texts?

Consider the first clause in the extract from text 2.3, one of the written texts:

Ann Burden physically is a slim girl, with short, roughly cut, mousy blonde hair.

The structure of the clause itself is very simple. Like many clauses in English, the structure is subject ('Ann Burden'), followed by verb ('is', part of the verb 'to be'), followed by a complement to the subject ('a slim girl, with short, roughly cut, mousy blonde hair'). However, if we look at the group of words that make up the subject and complement in the clause, we get an idea of what makes the written text lexically dense. The complement in particular consists of a long and complex nominal group. Nominal groups (Halliday, 1985a:72) are groups of words organized around a noun which forms the head of the group. A nominal group may consist of only one noun:

Ann Burden  
(head)  
he  
(head)

It may consist of the head noun, preceded by one or more modifying elements:

a withholding person  
(modifier) (modifier) (head)  
a mature and affectionate young lady  
(m) (m) (m) (m) (h)

Or it may consist of the head noun, preceded by modifiers, and followed by either phrases or clauses which qualify the head:

many things of the spirit  
(m) (h) (qualifier)  
an admirable character who is kind and sensitive  
(m) (m) (h) (qualifier)

Since qualifiers consist of phrases and clauses, they may contain additional nominal groups themselves, as in the nominal group which makes up the complement referred to above, from text 2.3:

a slim girl with short roughly cut mousy blonde hair  
(m) (m) (h) (qualifier)  
short, roughly cut, mousy, blonde hair  
(m) (m) (m) (m) (m) (h)

It is the composition of this nominal group which makes the clause lexically dense. This composition enables a list of Ann's physical attributes to be presented in one clause.

A comparison of other nominal groups in text 2.1 (the spoken text) and text 2.3 (the written text) reveals some of their differences:

<i>Written text</i>	<i>Spoken text</i>
a mature and affectionate young lady	I
a tanned complexion from working in the sun	he
the spiritual life and hope	the towns
the nuclear destruction and deadness	life
	Ann

While the spoken text contains a few longish nominal groups, such as 'that sort of attitude', 'life of power and glory', overall the written text contains many longer and more lexically dense nominal groups than the spoken text. Longer nominal groups enable a written text to compress information, to convey more content within its clauses. Spoken language can convey the same amount of 'content', but it employs more clauses to do so.

The differences in lexical density found in these two short extracts are representative of differences that occur across the whole of texts 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3. Text 2.1 (the spoken text), for example, has an overall lexical density of 1.5, while text 2.2 (Mr Loomis) has a lexical density of 2.7, and text 2.3 (Ann Burden) has a lexical density of 3.8. Both written texts have a considerably higher lexical density than the spoken text.

It is interesting to pursue the investigation of nominal groups a little further. The texts that we have been discussing are those produced by year 9 students who, although clearly competent students, are still developing as readers and writers. In order to gain some idea of the direction in which they are heading, it is instructive to examine some written texts that adults are expected to deal with. Consider the following extracts, texts 2.4 and 2.5.

Text 2.4 Extract from newspaper article

### **Shutdown Nearer as More Hospital Staff Resign**

Further staff resignations from Sydney's only repatriation hospital may force it to close later this month. Following a meeting on Thursday, the majority of the 47 medical specialists and administration officers at Concord Repatriation and General Hospital have decided to resign, joining the 112 medical officers who resigned last Monday in support of a better pay deal.

*Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April 1988, p. 3.

Text 2.4 is from a newspaper article and thus is written with the general public in mind. That is, it does not assume any prior knowledge or particular technical skill. Nominal groups in this text include:

- 1 Further staff resignations from Sydney's only repatriation hospital  
 (modifier) (head) (qualifier)



What has happened is that the actions have been nominalized: they have been turned into things. This process of nominalization is relevant to the nature of speech and writing referred to earlier. The actions of speech, which help to build its character as dynamic, become the nominalizations or 'things' of the written mode, which help to build the character of being 'fixed'. Once actions have been turned into things in written texts, they can do what other nouns can do; that is, they can act on other things or they can themselves be acted upon. As the text becomes increasingly nominalized, there are fewer people doing the actions. In the policy text, for example, it is 'familiarity', 'studies' and 'emerging policy analysis perspective' that are acting and being acted upon. This process of nominalization is a feature of many written texts, especially those of academic genres, and usually is associated with the build-up of abstraction within the text. This means that the abstract concept itself is the focus of discussion and the doer of the action, rather than people. If we 'translate' the policy text into a spoken version, the role of people becomes more obvious. For example:

It was familiar, because academics and researchers had been interested for a long time in how governments operate, and how people decide on policy. Political scientists, economists, and other people had studied these things, and now they were taken up by people who were interested in analysing policy.

What such a 'translation' does is to change some of the nominalizations into verbs and qualities:

<i>Written version</i>		<i>Spoken version</i>
familiarity	becomes	it was familiar
long standing interest	becomes	had been interested for a long time
operation of government	becomes	how governments operate
policy issues	becomes	how people decide on policy
studies	becomes	people who had studied
policy analysis	becomes	people who were interested in analysing policy

The translation 'unpacks' some of the nominalizations that occur in the written text. This is why it appears a little easier to understand. However, it also makes the text more cumbersome: 'policy analysis' is much more succinct than 'people who were interested in analysing policy'. Nominalization, and the abstraction that results from it, is functional in that it enables abstract concepts to be discussed. It enables complex arguments to be summarized and then used as a basis for further discussion or argument.

Much of the language of subjects like history and English is characterized by nominalization and abstraction. Science, geography and economics all utilize nominalization in the build-up of the technical lexis which forms the basis of their taxonomies of the world. In chapter 5, Cope and Kalantzis

take up some of these matters in the social sciences, while Martin considers the technical language of the natural sciences in chapter 4.

### Grammatical intricacy

The discussion of lexical density could be interpreted as indicating that written language is more complex than spoken. While in one way this is true, it is quite untrue in another very important sense. I shall return to the brief extracts from the year 9 spoken and written text to explain what I mean. These extracts are presented again, this time set out clause by clause:

Written version (text 2.3)

1. Ann Burden physically is a slim girl with short roughly cut mousy blonde hair
- [ 2. She has a tanned complexion from working in the sun
- [ 3. and wears men's clothes
- [ 4. for they are the most practical for farming

Spoken version (text 2.1)

- [ 1. Like I reckon
- [ 2. he would have been really nice
- [ 3. but now that he's been to all the towns
- [ 4. and seen
- [ 5. like there's no life or anything
- [ 6. and he comes into the valley
- [ 7. and sees Ann
- [ 8. and sees life
- [ 9. and he just wanted the power over her
- [ 10. because he's never had power or anything before

The written extract consists of two sentences. The first contains just one clause, while the second contains three clauses. In the second sentence, clause 4 is in a dependency relationship with clause 3, and both add to clause 2 to form the sentence. Now compare the spoken extract. Here the relationships between the clauses are much more intricate. The entire extract forms one sentence (or *clause complex*, to use the linguistic term). There are three levels of relationship as indicated by the brackets beside the clauses. At the first level are clauses 1 and 2, 4 and 5, then 6, 7 and 8, and then 9 and 10. At the second level, clauses 4 and 5 are added to clause 3, and at the third level, clauses 1 and 2, then 3, 4 and 5, then 6, 7 and 8, and then 9 and 10 add to form the total clause complex. Other sections of the spoken text reveal even more intricate clause complexes.

This situation is characteristic of spoken and written texts. That is, spoken language is typically more grammatically intricate than written language. So, while written language is more complex than spoken language in terms of lexical density, it is also true that spoken language is more complex than written language in terms of its grammatical intricacy. Each is complex in its own way, and each serves the purposes for which it evolved in different ways.

A brief return to text 2.5, the extract from the book on policy, confirms this. The text is now presented again with the lexical items underlined:

Lexical items in textbook extract (text 2.5)

This familiarity sprang in part from the long standing interest in the operation of government and in policy issues among academics and researchers.

Studies [which had originally developed out of the work of political scientists, economists and others] were now embraced by the emerging policy analysis perspective.

The extract comprises two sentences consisting of one clause each, although the second contains an embedded clause ('which had originally developed out of the work of political scientists, economists and others'). However, when this extract is translated into a spoken version, we find the following:

Lexical items in spoken version of text 2.5

It was familiar  
[ because academics and researchers for a long time had been  
  interested in  
  [ how governments operate  
    and how people decide on policy.  
  Political scientists, economists and other people had studied  
    these things  
  and now they were taken up by people [who were interested in  
    analysing policy]

There are still two sentences, but instead of a total of two clauses there are now six, one of which contains an embedded clause. The sentences of the spoken version are considerably more complex than those in the written text. While the written text has 23 lexical items spread across 2 clauses giving a lexical density of 11.5, the spoken version has 21 lexical items, 6 clauses, and hence a lexical density of 3.5. The written text is lexically denser, while the spoken version is grammatically more intricate.

It should be pointed out that differences in lexical density, nominalization and grammatical intricacy which occur between spoken and written language are not absolute differences. In some contexts the distinctions become rather blurred. This is likely to occur, for example, in texts which are written to be spoken, as for radio, television or public lectures. Such texts will have features of both oral and written language. The differences referred to above represent clusters along a continuum. Generally, however, purposes and contexts in which oral and written language are used are separate, and their linguistic realizations reflect this separation.

## STUDENTS' EMERGING CONTROL OF LITERACY

Thus far, I have attempted to describe the similarities and differences between spoken and written modes of language. I have suggested that, while the underlying similarities between the two modes are significant in that each draws on the same linguistic system to make meaning, there are

also important differences. These differences lie principally in the areas of lexical density and grammatical intricacy. Written language tends to be lexically dense in comparison to spoken language, and spoken language tends to be grammatically intricate in relation to written language. I have also suggested that these differences exist because of the different natures of spoken and written language, and because of the different purposes each mode fulfils.

It follows that an important part of becoming literate is learning about these differences. How do children become aware of mode differences? How do they learn that when they write, they need to organize meanings in a different way from when they speak?

I shall now examine various stages in emerging control of literacy, by reference to data collected from children of different ages. In doing so, I shall draw on aspects of the comparison of spoken and written language presented above — in particular, the notions of lexical density and grammatical intricacy. I shall suggest that, as children mature as writers, the differences between their spoken and written language become increasingly obvious, and increasingly important. Further, I shall suggest that if students do not develop effective control of the features of written mode described above, their chances of academic success are minimal.

### **Beginning literacy development**

When children begin learning to read and write, the first important thing they learn is that they can make meaning through the written mode. In order to do so, they must learn the conventions of writing, which include, in English, left-to-right progression, word spacing, letter formation, spelling and punctuation. In the very early stages of writing development, what the child actually produces on paper will depend, at least while at school, on the kind of approach to literacy development that is used. Approaches that provide opportunities for frequent reading to children, and opportunities for children to write about their own experiences, are likely to teach that written language is an agency of making meaning. In such circumstances children are able to draw on what they already know about language; that is, they draw on their knowledge of spoken language and whatever information they have of how literacy operates. At this stage what children 'write' is very similar to their spoken utterances. Thus children in kindergarten produce the kinds of text shown in Figures 2.1 and 2.2 (pages 44–5), representing their earliest attempts to come to terms with the written mode.

Both these figures were produced by young children from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Such children clearly have a more difficult task in becoming literate in English than first language users, in that they are learning the oral mode at the same time as they are beginning to learn the written one. However, for such children the underlying processes of becoming literate closely resemble those of children whose mother tongue is English. Fatmir spent a considerable part of his first year at school producing figures like the one shown here in figure 2.1. He regularly drew a series of apparently unrelated objects, such as the house, the boy, the rabbit and the caterpillar in figure 2.1, and then neatly labelled each one. Vlatko, who produced figure 2.2, on the other hand concentrated mainly on drawing

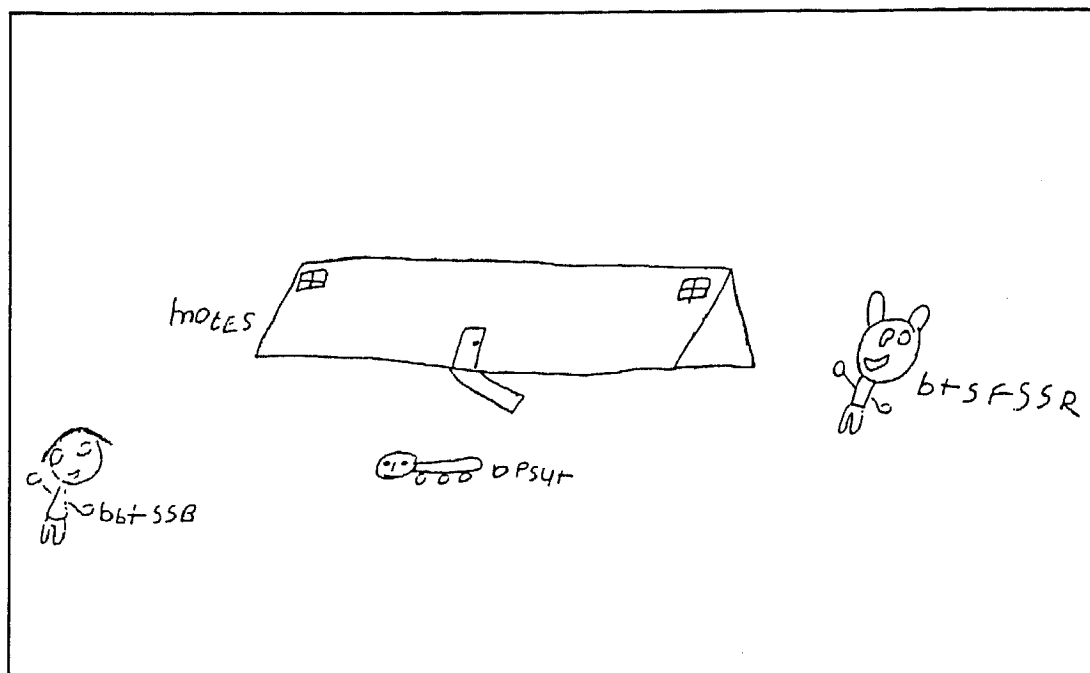


Figure 2.1 Beginning 'writing', by Fatmir, year 1 (reduced size)

elaborate pictures such as the one here, with Indians, cowboys, teepees, horses in a circle, and so on. His writing was of secondary consideration.

In these early attempts, the children were encouraged to move from drawing to writing, so that the drawing became a possible bridge helping them into the written mode. In such situations, the children's efforts to represent experience on paper clearly included the accompanying drawing. For example in figure 2.1, Fatmir's comments 'This is a house', 'This is a boy', etc. make sense only with reference to his drawing. While it is certainly possible for children to learn to write without drawing first, the drawing and attempted writing involve students and teacher in a negotiation of meaning. Such negotiations occur as the teacher reads to the children, and discusses the text being read. They occur when the child shows his or her attempts at producing written texts and then 'reads' to the teacher. These interactions between teacher and students mirror the interaction that occurs between adult and young child as the child begins to learn the mother tongue (Painter, 1986). In the same way as the adult supports and guides the child's early attempts at making meaning in the oral mode, the teacher supports and guides the children in their early attempts at developing control in the written mode. These interactions between student and teacher offer opportunities for discussion of the child's attempts at writing, and opportunities for the teacher to model written language in a way which is relevant to the individual child, and which demonstrates that writing makes meaning. This modelled writing also provides important opportunities for reading for the individual child, as well as for other children in the class.

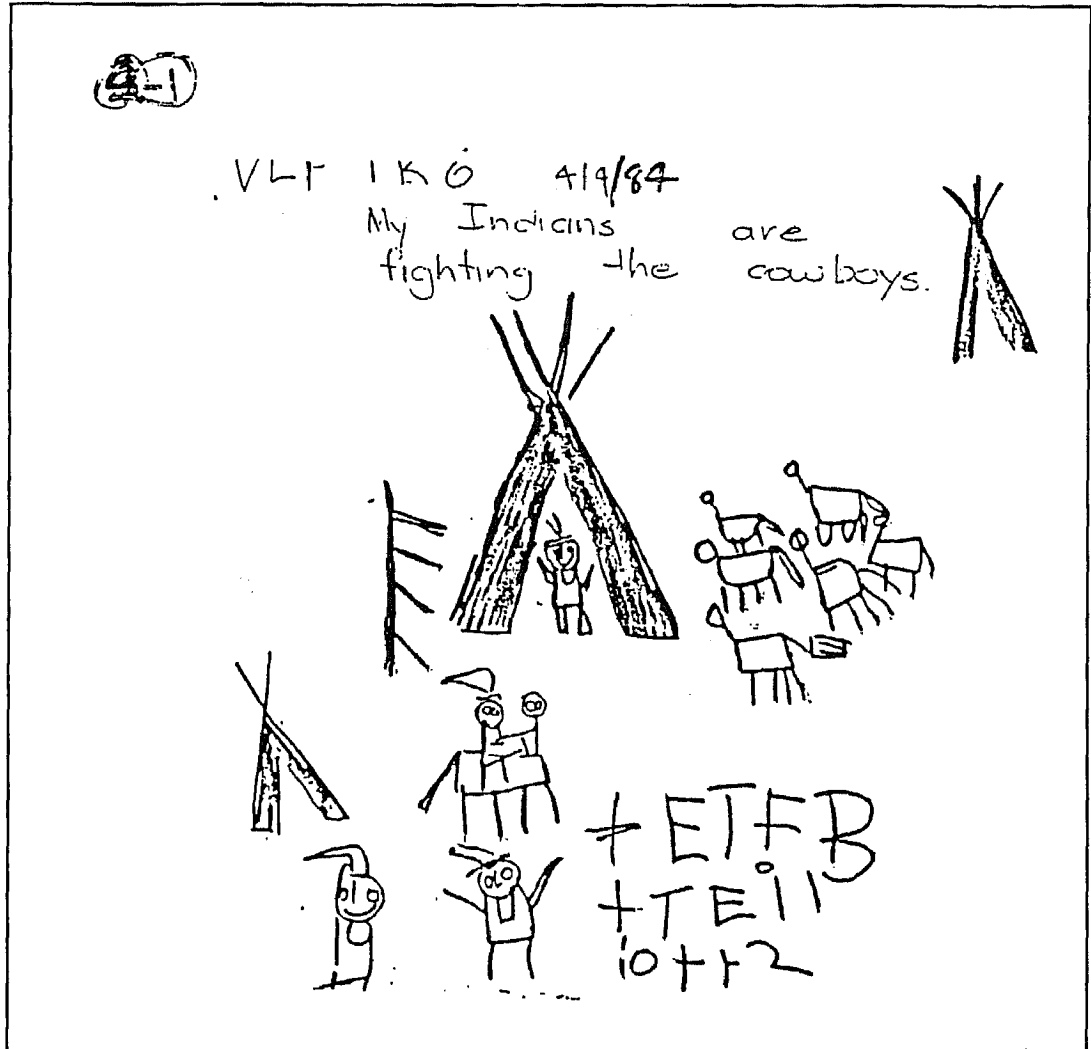


Figure 2.2 Beginning 'writing', by Vlatko, year 1

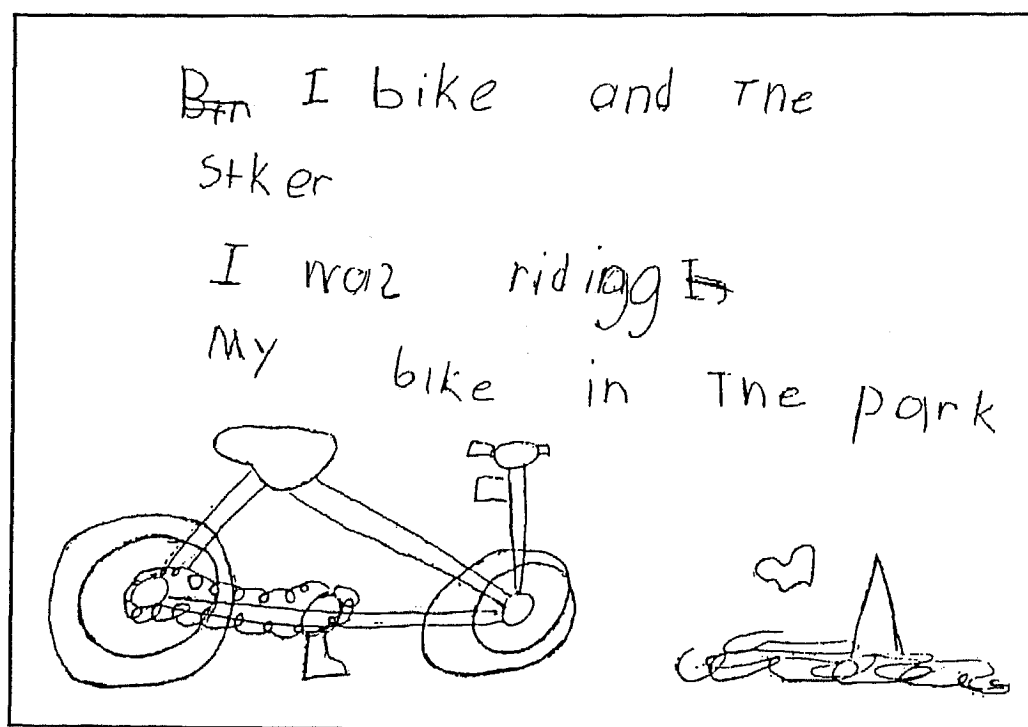
### Early literacy development lags behind oral language development

In the early stages of literacy development (for most children this includes the first few years at school), young children are considerably more proficient at speaking than at writing. This is partly due to the physical effort involved in producing written texts. But more importantly, young children simply know more about speech than about writing. They have, after all, been learning spoken language for a longer period of time than written language. Halliday, in his book *Spoken and Written Language* (1985a, chapter 1), points to an analogy between the development of the individual and the development of the species. He suggests that in many ways the

individual recapitulates the history of the species. Thus, just as the use of the oral mode of language evolved in the human species long before the written mode so, in the development of the individual, the child learns to talk before learning to read and write. When the child begins to read and write, early attempts at written language parallel the kind of spoken language used by a much younger child. Children regress, as it were, to an earlier stage of language development as they begin to develop control of the written mode.

Even in the case of young children from non-English-speaking backgrounds such as Fatmir and Vlatko, control of oral English clearly develops at a much faster rate than that of written English. For example, while in year 1, Fatmir produced text 2.6.

Text 2.6 Beginning 'writing', by Fatmir, year 1



In producing text 2.6, Fatmir drew his picture and then gave his teacher a lengthy oral recount about riding his bike on the footpath near the water and seeing a shark in the water. When the teacher suggested he should write a recount of all these events, he replied that he couldn't, and instead he wrote:

I bike and the stker [shark].

He read this to his teacher and, in doing so, he realized that it did not make sense. He next wrote:

I waz riding my bike in the park.

He used some of the print available in the classroom environment to assist him to write this sentence. Thus a rich and quite detailed oral recount became a very simple and considerably less interesting written text.

The gap between Fatmir's control of the oral and the written modes of language is typical of other young children, whether from English-speaking or non-English-speaking backgrounds. Young children, in learning to read and write, are learning a new mode of making meaning. This involves learning the conventions of writing, but it also involves learning the mode differences that exist between spoken and written language, referred to earlier in this chapter. That is, it involves learning the decontextualized nature of written language, learning the structure of different written genres, learning to sequence events in an explicit linear fashion, learning to organize information, and learning to utilize the resources of grammar in different ways. All these aspects of written language are different from spoken language, so it is not surprising that children regress in their use of language for a time while they are developing control of the written mode.

### **Developing awareness of mode differences**

The differences in proficiency between speaking and writing are apparent in the language development of young children for many years. However, primary school children demonstrate an increasing awareness of mode differences in their own use of spoken and written language, largely as a result of their language experiences both at school and at home. Christie (e.g. 1984a, 1985a), in her work on children's writing development, argues that it is context rather than stage of development that shapes children's growing awareness of oral and written modes of language. She demonstrates that the patterns of interaction occurring in the class between teacher and student are reflected in the written genres produced by children at school. For example, the patterns of the Morning News session and other such activities provide opportunities for a rehearsal of several early written genres of personal experience. As well, the reading that children engage in, both at home and at school, contributes to their developing awareness of the written mode of language. The more children read, and the greater the range of genres they encounter, the more they will learn about how written language works. However, as well as being involved in classroom activities that provide a rehearsal for written genres, and having opportunities for reading, children themselves need to engage in writing for specific purposes. If children receive support and guidance from their teachers in how to go about writing effectively in a range of genres, they can demonstrate increasing control of the mode features, referred to earlier, from quite a young age.

The following texts are part of the classroom discourse recorded in a year 3 class. The class had been engaged in a unit of work on traditional Aborigines. In the lesson in which this recording was made, teacher and students wrote a class-negotiated report about the kinds of food that traditional Aboriginal people ate. The classroom discourse that preceded the writing focused on what the children knew about food eaten by traditional Aborigines. The children contributed freely, either by recounting a relevant experience or by offering information. An example is given in text 2.7.

## Text 2.7 Class discussion

*Student:* When we were in Queensland  
my dad had some friends up there  
and he asked  
if we could borrow some guns for hunting and  
everything  
and as we were all going there  
we could see their paintings  
like rocks and things got patterns on them and  
everything

*Teacher:* Good. Yes?

*Student:* When they find them in trees  
sometimes they cut the roots off  
and if they're strong roots  
they put rocks around them  
and they put the poison mixed in the water  
and the fish lay down dead.

When it came to negotiating the written report, again the children participated freely, but the nature of their contributions was somewhat different. Here they were offering sentences that would form part of the written text. That is, in text 2.7 the children's contributions were oral statements that added to the shared class knowledge on the topic of the food eaten by traditional Aboriginals, while in text 2.8 the children's contributions, although spoken, were spoken to be written, that is, to add to the shared class report.

## Text 2.8 Spoken contributions for written report

*Student:* Aboriginals usually eat fish seafood as their main meal.

*Teacher:* (*writing*) Aboriginals usually eat seafood. Okay. Yes?

*Student:* Aboriginals used to cook their food in hot open fires  
and they used to put in hot coals.

*Teacher:* (*writing*) Aboriginals cooked their food, yeah, on hot open  
fires.  
Okay, what else? Come on.

*Student:* Aboriginals catch fish in nets  
and when it was high tide  
they would come  
and get the fish.

*Teacher:* (*writing*) Fish in nets. Is that what you said? Yep?

*Student:* Aboriginals hunt for their food.

*Student:* Aboriginals spear ducks and birds by hiding in the reeds.

*Student:* Aboriginals eat emus, snails and eggs.

*(Parts of the teacher's responses have been omitted in this text for the sake of brevity.)*

If we compare the lexical density and grammatical intricacy of these two sections of the class discourse, we find similar patterns to those described earlier in the comparison of spoken and written language. Text 2.7 has the typical features of a spoken text. It contains 25 lexical items (e.g. Queensland, dad, friends). These are spread over 13 clauses and hence the whole

text has a lexical density of 2. Text 2.8 on the other hand, contains 38 lexical items (e.g. Aborigines, fish seafood, main meal) spread over 10 clauses, and has a lexical density of 3.8, almost double that of text 2.7.

The nominal groups in text 2.8 are somewhat longer than those in text 2.7 although the differences here are not as great as those between the spoken and written texts produced by the year 9 students. For example:

*Nominal groups in text 2.8*

fish seafood  
ducks and birds  
emus, snails and eggs

*Nominal groups in text 2.7*

we  
some friends  
their paintings

However, text 2.8 is notably different in its use of circumstantial information, which provides additional details of how activities are undertaken, or of where they take place. For example:

Circumstantial information in text 2.8

eat fish seafood as their main meal  
cook their food in hot open fires  
spear ducks and birds by hiding in the reeds

Such details are not necessary in spoken texts, as the context in which the spoken text is created typically provides this kind of information. It would appear that the students have a good sense of the need for written texts to be 'decontextualized'.

When we compare the grammatical structure of the sentences, we find that those in text 2.7 are considerably more intricate than the sentences in text 2.8. For example:

Grammatical structure of text 2.7

[ When they find them in trees  
[ sometimes they cut the roots off  
[ and if they're strong roots  
[ they put rocks around them  
[ and they put the poison mixed in the water  
[ and the fish lay down dead.

Grammatical structure of text 2.8

Aborigines usually eat fish seafood as their main meal.  
[ Aborigines used to cook their food in hot open fires,  
[ and they used to put in hot coals.

Thus, although the children are clearly still developing as writers, these texts reflect the patterns discussed previously, where spoken texts are lexically sparse but grammatically intricate, and written texts are lexically dense but grammatically less intricate. Such patterns contribute to the different qualities of the spoken and written texts.

The differences between texts 2.7 and 2.8 are interesting in that both were taken from the same class discourse on the same day and are about the same topic. The major difference between them is one of mode. Text 2.7 is typical spoken classroom discourse, while text 2.8, although spoken, was spoken to be written. The children knew that their contributions were to be used in the written class report, and consequently the differences between their contributions in the two texts clearly indicate the extent of their awareness of mode differences.

### **The role of the teacher**

The role of the teacher in providing information about the written mode of language was a particularly significant feature of the lesson in which texts 2.7 and 2.8 were recorded. She had ensured, through work done in previous lessons, that the children had adequate information about the topic on which they were to write their report. She began this lesson by asking the children for relevant information and listing their contributions on the board. This information was used as a basis for negotiating the appropriate structure and organization of the shared class report. The discussion which followed focused on the purpose and structure of a report, as well as a suitable means of organizing the available information. At this stage of the school year, the children were familiar with terms like 'narrative' and 'report', as well as with those referring to text structures, so they had a shared class language which enabled them to discuss the construction of this report in quite explicit detail. For example, the discussion covered the need for a general introduction, comparison of introductions of various reports written by the class, the contrast between the structure of reports and the structure of narratives, and ways of organizing the information around the notions of hunting, fishing and gathering. The teacher and students together negotiated the writing of the text. Thus the report not only provided a model for the children to use in their own writing, but a model which the children themselves had actively constructed. The support and guidance provided by the teacher, which was a regular feature of this class, contributed in no small way to the children's developing awareness of mode differences, revealed through the analysis of texts 2.7 and 2.8.

### **Development of mode awareness: an ongoing process**

Analysis of texts 2.7 and 2.8 indicates that the year 3 children who produced the texts already have a developing understanding of mode differences and of the requirements of writing texts for specific purposes. However, development of awareness of mode differences, and particularly development of awareness of requirements of written genres, continues for many years. We find evidence of this ongoing development of mode awareness if we return to texts 2.2 and 2.3, the two written texts produced by the year 9 students.

The lexical density of both texts 2.2 and 2.3 varies somewhat from section to section within the texts. This is particularly noticeable in text 2.2 in sections such as:

- When Ann mentioned to Mr Loomis right at the end
    - that if he had already killed Edward
    - he might as well kill her
    - he falls to pieces
    - and says she doesn't know that for sure
    - so we also know Mr Loomis has feelings of remorse
    - about killing Edward
    - and that he didn't really think of the consequences.

In the student's text all of the above is one sentence, which consists of seven clauses. The lexical density of this section is 2.2, that is, it is lower than the average (2.7) for the whole text. Grammatically, the sentence is considerably more intricate than many of the others in the same text. Compare, for example, the following sentences, which appear in the same text:

- Mr Loomis is totally opposite in character to Ann.
- Mr Loomis never lets anyone stop him
  - if he wants to do something.

Here, the writer is using a more 'spoken' way of expressing herself. This section of the text indicates that, like the children in the year 3 class, she is still developing control of the written mode.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have addressed the question of whether learning to read and write is the same as learning to speak. In doing so, I have compared the spoken and written modes of language. I have suggested that, because each evolved to fulfil different purposes, they draw differently from the underlying linguistic systems of English, and that the differences are most clearly reflected in patterns of lexical density and grammatical intricacy.

In regard to learning to speak and learning to read and write, I have suggested that, in the early stages of literacy development, learning to read and write is, in many ways, similar to learning to speak. Thus early literacy instruction can usefully be informed by what we know of how children learn their oral language. However, as literacy development continues, it becomes less and less like learning to speak. The analysis of the short section of text 2.2 shows that students in secondary school are still developing control of the written mode. This is because learning to read and write is an involved and complex activity, which continues throughout life. Even professional writers continue to work hard at getting their writing right. University students (at least those concerned with the quality of their work) draft and redraft their assignments. This paper, as a case in point, has been through several drafts before reaching its present stage. A more conscious, deliberate and analytic effort is involved in learning to read and write than in learning to speak. As students learn new fields, or new content areas, and new written genres, they face new demands in the use of language in the written mode. Becoming proficient in utilizing these genres takes time and effort. The further a child progresses through school, the more significant are the

differences between spoken and written language, and the more important it is for teachers to be aware, and to provide information about these differences for their students. Being unable to control these differences will contribute to a student's failure at school. A 'fresh look' at literacy must acknowledge the differences, as well as the similarities, between learning to speak and learning to read and write.

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